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Early Plumbers of Terre Haute

Business (T.H.)

By DOROTHY J. CLARK

The city's very first plumber and gas-fitter was pioneer David W. Watson, who was born in County Armagh, Ireland, in 1820. He was educated for the ministry at the Presbyterian College of Belfast, but preferred another calling and learned the trade of plumbing. He came to New York and then to Terre Haute in January, 1856, at the invitation of the men responsible for the erection of the first gas plant here. It seems there was no one here at that time qualified to do gas fitting, and this was the reason that Mr. Watson established his business here. His chosen life work became closely interwoven with the development of Terre Haute.



Dorothy J. Clark, built a frame business building at the corner of Third and Mulberry which had the shop on the ground floor and the residence on the second floor, the common arrangement in those times.

Business prospered and in 1862 he built at 634 Main (Wabash) where later the Star newspaper office was located. This was a brick structure with a stone front and was the most pretentious business building at that time. It was also the first stone front business house here.

Tried Ice Business.

In 1868 Mr. Watson also engaged in the ice business as a sideline, but unfortunately contracted rheumatism and had to quit that venture. He continued the pumping and gas fitting business until his death in 1883. His son, John C. Watson, carried on the business and in 1885 the firm of D. W. Watson's Sons Co. was formed. In 1906 the company opened a large elaborate showroom on South Seventh street.

Frank Prox, who came to Terre Haute in 1869, was another pioneer in the plumbing trade. In 1875 he formed a partnership with D. W. Watson to do gas fitting, copper-smithing and plumbing, known as Watson & Prox. Two years later however, in 1877, he engaged in business for himself at 677 Wabash, later moving to 17-25 North Ninth street. Expanding still further, Frank Prox formed a partnership with W. R. McKeen and John F. Brinkman and the new company purchased the Phoenix Foundry and Machine Co. in 1890 and erected additional large buildings which occupied a solid block on North Ninth.

Inventor of Some Note.

In 1905 Mr. Prox became the sole owner of the business. He was an inventor of some note, and among other things, invented steam and hot water appliances of great value. His son, Anton Prox, had learned the plumbing trade in his father's shop then located in the second block on North Ninth street and after several years in the trade, he became associated with his father in the plumbing and supply business on Wabash—later moving to North Eighth street. When the elder Prox retired, he disposed of his interests in the business to Mr. Burget, who was thereafter associated with Anton Prox in business. The Prox & Burget Company was the largest of its kind in Terre Haute and did business throughout Indiana. Anton Prox died in 1922.

To learn more about the early plumbing trade, I talked to Terre Haute's oldest plumber, John Dilg, 1614 Garfield avenue, who is 81 years old. He was born in Terre Haute in 1876, the son of Peter Dilg, a carpenter for the Pennsylvania Railroad. They lived at 1442 Eagle and Mr. Dilg attended the Fifth Ward School at Twelfth and Chestnut streets.

Ten Cents An Hour.

He began his plumber's apprenticeship with D. W. Watson & Sons at the now almost unbelievable sum of 10 cents an hour. This was a three-year apprenticeship, graduating to a journeyman's wages of

\$2.50 for a 10-hour day. In 1899 when he married Miss Elizabeth Kerner, daughter of John and Amelia Kerner, he was earning \$7.50 a week.

Mr. Dilg said, "There were quite a few modern houses in Terre Haute when I first began the plumber's trade. The big difference in the work of present times and those early times was that in those days we used lead pipe, and now iron pipe is used. You had to be a real mechanic to work with lead, joining the lead sections of pipe with solder was ticklish, painstaking work."

The plumbers' union suffered with growing pains and staged many strikes lasting from three to as long as eight months. During the times of strikes many of the union plumbers would leave Terre Haute temporarily to find work in other cities. Mr. Dilg remembers working in Indianapolis on the job when the Claypool Hotel was being built. He has worked in Chicago, French Lick and during World War I was working in Louisville, Ky. Here in Terre Haute he has worked on the Hotel Deming and Terre Haute House plumbing installations. Before his retirement two years ago because of ill health, he was the city's plumbing inspector.

Life Membership.

On Sept. 5, 1950, Local Union 157 presented life membership cards and U.A. insignia rings to Louis C. Jentz, initiated in 1896 and a charter member of the local, who just recently passed away. Mr. Dilg, who was initiated in 1898, and Albert Born, initiated in 1903, who has also passed away, leaving Mr. Dilg as the oldest plumber in the local union. Mr. Fred H. Von-Eute is another veteran plumber who remembers one of his first jobs was the installation of the plumbing at the Union Depot.

Mr. Dilg remembered that when he was a young boy a favorite winter sport was ice skating on the old canal, starting at Ninth and One-half and Wabash, on down to Poplar street. Another thrill was tobogganing on Strawberry Hill.

Mr. and Mrs. Dilg have three children, a son Herman, living in Silver Springs, Md.; a son Leslie, who is a national organizer for the plumbers' union in Washington, D. C., and a daughter Helen, now Mrs. Robert Hessler of Detroit, Mich.

Local Union 157 was organized first in 1894 but lost its charter as the membership dropped below seven members. Again in 1896 a little group of seven or eight men obtained a charter, and the membership has grown to 1,161 at the present time. This local covers a large territory comprised of 10 counties in Indiana and three counties in Illinois.

Community Affairs File

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